

Lessons from the frontline: Introduction to the special issue on providing sport psychology support for Olympic athletes

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This special issue of the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* has been produced to add to the growing literature on the unique and complex challenge of providing sport psychology support for Olympic athletes. McCann's seminal 2008 paper, "At the Olympics, Everything is a Performance Issue" cemented the notion that consulting at the Olympic Games is a venture into the unpredictable. The list of Olympic stressors with the capacity to threaten the emotional equilibrium and ultimately the performance of athletes, coaches and their support teams, is seemingly endless (see Gould & Maynard, 2009; Heberl & Petersen, 2006; Si & Lee, 2008; Terry, Zhang, Kim, Morris, & Hanrahan, 2014) and hence examples of effective strategies used to prevent or manage them function as valuable resources for students, neophyte practitioners and fellow professionals alike.

As editors of this special issue, we are greatly indebted to the contributing authors for their willingness to share reports of Olympic involvement, and for the articulacy with which they have conveyed them. The articles contained herein are not intended as scientific studies of Olympic sport psychology consulting *per*

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se, but rather as a series of authentic narratives of approaches that may be effective when working with Olympic athletes and teams, each informed by varying therapeutic and performance enhancement strategies, underpinned by distinct theoretical frameworks.

Of the six papers included, three focus on psychological support programs for athletes competing at the 2008, 2012 and 2016 Olympic Summer Games, with particular reference to the sports of boxing, sailing, and track and field; two papers focus on alpine sports, with reference to the 2010 and 2014 Olympic Winter Games and the 2012 Youth Olympic Winter Games, while one paper offers an overview of lessons learned from some of the world's most experienced sport psychologists. The special issue has an appropriately international line-up of contributors, with representation from Australia, Canada, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the United Kingdom.

Most athletes involved in Olympic sports regard competing at the Games as a significant highlight of their careers, if not the pinnacle, and this is no less true for the sport psychologists who support them. Such is the historical and cultural significance of the Olympic Games, that the first author's own 30-year career as an applied sport psychologist has been defined to a large extent by experiences at six summer and three winter Olympiads. Some of those experiences, when athletes won Olympic gold and changes their lives forever, were satisfying beyond words. Other experiences, when Murphy's Law applied and anything that could go wrong did go wrong, generated feelings of inadequacy that left a scar on his professional self-image.

A recent study of sport psychology consulting effectiveness among elite athletes (Sharp & Hodge, 2014) has highlighted the need for practitioners to

gain extensive experience consulting with athletes and to use an athlete-centered, individualized approach to consulting. For those seeking to develop a career as sport psychology consultants, meeting these dual imperatives represents a considerable challenge, almost a Catch-22 scenario, in that opportunities to gain the required consulting experience in order to develop the capacity to effectively individualize support for elite athletes, are largely reserved for those who have already accumulated extensive prior experience. This special issue therefore represents a valuable learning resource for all practitioners aspiring towards Olympic involvement.

The first paper in this special issue, by Arnold and Sarkar, entitled *Preparing Athletes and Teams for the Olympic Games: Experiences and Lessons Learned from the World's Best Sport Psychologists*, includes many insights into the world of Olympic consulting based on interviews with 15 experienced sport psychology practitioners who, collectively, have notched up more than 200 years of first-hand experience in preparing Olympic athletes and teams. Interviews identified 28 themes under the five headings of Olympic stressors, success and failure lessons, top tips for neophyte practitioners, differences within one's own consulting work, and multidisciplinary consulting.

Cruikshank and Collins authored the second paper in this special issue, entitled *The P⁷ Approach to the Olympic Challenge: Sharing a Practical Framework for Mission Preparation and Execution*, in which they present an organizational approach to preparation for major sporting events that includes a detailed planning framework for athletes, coaches, and support teams. The framework facilitates the focused utilization of support staff and resources to address the myriad challenges inherent in the Olympic environment. The authors

contextualize their framework using the support provided to the Great Britain track and field team at the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

The third paper in this special issue is a report by Kristiansen of her investigation into how nine Norwegian athletes perceived their involvement in the inaugural Winter Youth Olympic Games, held in Innsbruck, Austria in 2012. The paper, entitled *Competing for Culture: Young Olympians' Narratives from the First Winter Youth Olympic Games*, first addresses the ethos of the Youth Olympic Games, which emphasises the manner in which athletes compete over their sporting achievements, in an attempt to preserve the mythical ideal that the importance of the Games is "not so much to win as to take part." Kristiansen then explores the personal meaning attached to the Games experience via narratives from competitors in biathlon, curling and luge events.

The fourth paper in the special issue is a case study entitled *Sport Psychology at the Olympics: The Case of a Danish Sailing Crew in a Head Wind*, in which Henriksen provides a descriptive account and personal reflections of his work with Team Denmark before, during, and after the 2012 London Olympics. Henriksen's interventional style, in common with many applied practitioners, is founded on a cognitive-behavioural tradition, informed by so-called "third wave" strategies such as acceptance and commitment therapy (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004) and the mindfulness-acceptance-commitment approach to performance psychology (Gardner & Moore, 2007). In this detailed account of the support provided to a sailing team that, objectively at least, performed *below* expectations, Henriksen offers refreshing and instructive insights into the reality of Olympic sport psychology and, in particular, the almost inevitable cloud of

self-doubt that hangs menacingly over practitioners who reflect on the support they have provided for underperforming athletes.

In the fifth paper in this special issue, entitled *Skating on Olympic Ice: Working with Winter Olympians*, Moyle recounts her experiences supporting Australian teams at the Olympic Winter Games of 2010 and 2014. Moyle addresses many of the complex challenges encountered by Olympic consultants, including the paradoxical dilemma of whether to encourage an athlete to approach the Games as just another competition when, in truth, everyone knows that the event may represent a once-in-an-athletic-career opportunity to produce a peak performance. Moyle also discusses the Gold Medal Fever phenomenon (Gould & Maynard, 2009), exacerbated by the media feeding frenzy that accompanies every Olympics, which can cause even the most disciplined and well-prepared athlete to inexplicably make last-moment and often illogical adjustments to well-honed tactics or equipment simply because "this is the Olympics."

The sixth and final contribution to the special issue, entitled *Psychological Support for the Canadian Olympic Boxing Team in Meta-Transitions through the National Team Program*, is penned by Schinke, Stambulova, Trepanier, and Oghene. In this paper, the authors chronicle the psychological support, delivered and forthcoming, for the Canadian Boxing Team during the 2013-2016 Olympic cycle. The support is mapped for the boxers as the six meta-transitions of entering the national team program, entering major international tournaments, Olympic qualification, focused preparation for the Olympic Games, challenging for a place on the Olympic podium, and the post-Games period. The authors particularly emphasise the importance of embedding a program of

psychological support within a broader, high-level support framework, in this case the *Own the Podium* program (www.ownthepodium.org), which is endorsed and supported financially by various levels of government, by Sport Canada and the Canadian Olympic Committee, through to the national governing bodies of sport, including Boxing Canada. Such a programmatic model allows for an increased likelihood of ongoing funding in an uncertain world, where sport psychology support is often regarded as a luxury item that may be the first to be ditched from the athlete support menu should funding become scarce.

In an account of the evolution of applied sport psychology (Terry, 2011), among many other topics, the first author addressed the globalization of the discipline, the specialist training of practitioners, the evidence base for therapeutic techniques used with athletes, and the increasingly specialized nature of the resources being developed for professionals in the field. This special issue of the *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology* has relevance for each of those topics, and should prove to be a valuable resource for anyone interested in providing sport psychology support for Olympic athletes.

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